



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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18 January 2011

### HND103660.E

Honduras: Availability of tattoo removal services, particularly to current or former gang members, including the process, effectiveness and cost; reaction, if any, from gangs when former members have gang-related tattoos removed  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### Tattoo removal services

Pine Magazine, an Atlanta, Georgia-based online publication, (Pine Magazine n.d.), published an article in 2009 on the challenges gang members face when trying to leave the Mara Salvatrucha-13 (MS-13), an international gang found throughout North, Central and South America, including in La Ceiba, Honduras (ibid. 16 Jan. 2009). According to a special advisor to the Honduran president, who is quoted in the article, governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that help rehabilitate ex-gang members also focus on tattoo removal (ibid.). The Special Advisor also said that the first lady of Honduras had recently obtained money from the city of Madrid to buy a tattoo removal machine and that, anyone wanting a tattoo removed with the machine, must first be enrolled in a "rehabilitation program and undergo psychological and social evaluations" (ibid.).

As well, a reverend at Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, a Catholic Church missionary society based in New York (Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers n.d.), stated that *Adios Tatujes*, a tattoo removal program he founded in 2000, is the only such program available to youth at risk and former gang members in Honduras (ibid. 22 Dec. 2010b). The program is funded through the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, his own "personal allowance" and a "minimal donation" provided by clients (ibid.). The service is known by word-of-mouth, promoted through the media and advertised on the Catholic radio station in San Pedro Sula (ibid. 22 Dec. 2010a). In addition to a "clinic run by the Catholic parish of barrio San José," in Tegucigalpa, the Reverend indicated that "there are three tattoo removal clinics in San Pedro Sula" (ibid. 22 Dec. 2010b):

- [O]ne at the clinic in Colonia Zorzales in Chamelecón (the main clinic),
- [O]ne at the Catholic parish of Barrio medina (at the Sunseri Chapel), and
- [O]ne run by the Mennonites in Chaloma. (ibid.)

#### Process, effectiveness and cost

The Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers reverend said that the staff at the

Chamelecón clinic have successfully removed around 7,000 to 10,000 tattoos over the 10 years the clinic has been operating (ibid.). He said that the process, which uses white light, is "as good as the laser removal process and ... much more cost effective" (ibid.). He added that the cost is about \$3 USD per treatment and that a person must receive about four or five treatments, on average, for each tattoo that is removed (ibid.).

However, a former MS-13 gang member, who reportedly had a tattoo removed with the laser process and paid for by the Catholic Church, still had remnants of the tattoo three years later (Pine Magazine 16 Jan. 2009). As the Pine Magazine reporter writes, there is "a tangle of scar tissue" on his left forearm and the "faint lines of a letter almost like an 'm' are discernable through the scarring" (ibid. 16 Jan. 2009).

## **Social stigma**

In follow-up correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers reverend said that a gang member cannot get a job at a factory or go to school if he has a tattoo, and that, without removal, "there is no hope of getting ahead in life except staying in the gang" (22 Dec. 2010a). The ex-MS-13 gang member is cited in the Pine Magazine article as saying that it is difficult to find work once a potential employer sees his tattoos (16 Jan. 2009). The Special Advisor to the Honduran president is also quoted as saying that former gang members may be discriminated against because of the special type of tattoos they have (ibid.).

## **Reaction from gangs**

The Pine Magazine article states that "[g]ang affiliations can be easily recognized by the tattoos members have" (Pine Magazine 16 Jan. 2009). However, even with the tattoo removed, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers reverend said that he believes "many" former gang members are still in danger (22 Dec. 2010a). He added that an agreement with gangs used to enable a member to leave the gang and get the identifying tattoo removed providing the member started going to church (Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers 22 Dec. 2010a). The Reverend was unable to say whether the agreement still held (ibid.). Information corroborating the Reverend's statement about the ease with which gang members can leave a gang and have their gang-related tattoos removed could not be found within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

## References

Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Maryknoll, New York. 22 December 2010a. Follow-up correspondence with a reverend.

\_\_\_\_\_. 22 December 2010b. Correspondence with a reverend.

\_\_\_\_\_. N.d. "About Us." <<http://www.maryknollsociety.org/index.php/about-us>> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2010]

Pine Magazine. 16 January 2009. Holly Lang. "In Honduras, Leaving the Gang Is Not an Easy Feat." <<http://www.pinemagazine.com/site/article/in-honduras-leaving-the-gang-is-not-an-easy-feat-13>> [Accessed 14 Dec. 2010]

\_\_\_\_\_. N.d. "About Pine." <<http://www.pinemagazine.com/about>> [Accessed 21 Dec. 2010]

#### Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** A senior research fellow at Brooks World Poverty Institute in Manchester, United Kingdom (UK) was unable to provide information for this Response. Attempts to contact the editor at Pine Magazine in Atlanta, Georgia; an Associate Professor of Political Science at Birmingham-Southern College in Alabama; and representatives at the Embassy of Honduras in Ottawa, the Federation of Development Organizations of Honduras (*FOPRIDEH*); and Casa Alianza, the Latin American branch of Covenant House in Honduras were unsuccessful.

**Internet sites, including:** Casa Alianza, *Diario La Prensa* [San Pedro Sula], *Diario Tiempo* [San Pedro Sula], Freedom House, *The Guardian* [London, UK], *El Heraldo* [Tegucigalpa], Hondudario.com [Tegucigalpa], *Honduras Weekly* [Tegucigalpa], Human Rights Watch, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), Latin American Network Information Center (LANIC), Latinnews.com [London, UK], The Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, United Nations Refworld, USAID, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

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